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Book dissects and dissertates

MELTZER

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"When it first clicked, rock'n'roll was a really interesting use of the marketplace," he says. "You could say there was something essential about being force-fed music by deejays, and what they were feeding you didn't cause cancer – yet. It may just be a historical accident that that was the case. ... Whether it was for somebody else's greater profit or not, the audience profited as well. It was a liberation of mind/heart/body/soul. Looking back, I have no regrets about having been sold dumb stuff like Bobby Darin's Splish Splash."

Not long after the first rock'n'roll era ended – when Elvis was inducted into the army – he was ready for jazzers like Ornette Coleman and Thelonious Monk. The second era, sparked by Beatlemania, was in full swing when he was a junior at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, majoring in philosophy. He cooked up a 156-page paper titled A Sequel: Tomorrow's Not Today, earning him an A+++ and the "totally unexpected" scribble, "Should be published."

In 1966, he attended graduate school at Yale, "to beat the draft, sure, but also to 'extend the text of philosophy' by dosing it silly with rock'n'roll," he says. "I'd be an alternate McLuhan, a 'man of ideas.' They threw me out." Meltzer's career as rock'n'roll journalist took off.

COURTESY OF RICHARD MELTZER

A typical party, circa '76: Meltzer, second from right, with (from left) rock writer Billy Altman, Legs McNeil, John Holmstrom and Roni Hoffman.

Back then, he writes in Whore, "I'd get up in the morning, smoke some dope, put on an LP, enter its, uh, universe, take profuse notes, play another album, jump from cut to cut, make the weirdest of plausible connections (no professors – wheeee! – to monitor the hidebound topicality of my thoughts any more), more notes, more records, occasional meals and masturbation, more more, then hop in the car and drive to Boston for Jefferson Airplane – or Asbury Park for the Doors – and home to write it up on my sister's diet pills."

"Things came to me as if out of nowhere," he told me later. "A lot of what appeared on record in the '60s felt very miraculous. One thing I realized when I re-read Aesthetics (in 1986, when it was re-issued) was how much faith I had put in rock'n'roll's future. It was primary music; you didn't have 'rock-surround' yet, there was no full map. I felt there was something left in the beast. It quickly turned out that there wasn't. The obvious cliché is, 'Rock'n'roll has a great future behind it.' It did. These false hopes were being created by the fact that Anglo-American bands – for a period of two, three years – were strip-mining entire new continents every time they put out an album. Eventually, they ran out of turf. By the summer of '68, how many surprises were left?"

Things quickly curdled. By the dawn of the '70s, so-called "rock-crit" was in bloom, bankrolled by the record industry. Rolling Stone, Creem, Fusion, Zoo World and Crawdaddy went legit. Meltzer was the most prolific (sometimes taking such pseudonyms as Borneo Jimmy, Lar Tusb and Eric Burdon). "I was writing for all of 'em. I'd average six pages a day, seven days a week, sometimes it would take me half an hour to do a five-page piece. I came to appreciate things I could get away with, acts of mischief. That's when I came up with intentional bad writing: All the cuss words, and 'ain't' and 'gonna.' The whole thing in one sentence, everything misspelled, saying things stupider than I had to, splitting my infinitives. In retrospect, my one lasting legacy I'm most proud of was that I introduced the general use of (that style) as part of the normal spew," he says.

> **"Just because I didn't listen to albums didn't mean I shouldn't write about them."**

He received 50 albums a week, selling most to used record stores. "The companies started throwing money on the waters, force-feeding the public with hundreds of bands. In the course of two, three weeks, Columbia would send you three copies of a Chicago album, figuring sooner or later you'd break down and listen to it."

One product manager promised Meltzer 100 sealed records if he'd place three reviews of the debut album by Jimmy Spheeris (brother of Wayne's World director Penelope). He devoted 10 minutes to one review (included in Whore), noting the elapsed time after every couple of sentences. "I had nothing to say about it, did not listen to it, but stretched it for 10 minutes. In another review, I said the record was a tribute to the first all female expedition to Antarctica. I made up little stories about what the song titles meant. The reviews ran, but the guy decided I wasn't entitled to my 100 records.

"Just because I didn't listen to albums didn't mean I shouldn't write about them. That's what separated me from most." Prime Wallow, a section in the anthology, includes pieces in which he was writing "literally, about nothing. The scene by then, the hand-as-dealt by major-label rock'n'roll, equaled nothing. It had just gone from something to nothing. A lot of those reviews really do seem like I come to terms with the nothingness of it.

"Half the reason I did what I did, being a bad boy and all, was that I had contempt for every single one of these record-company people. They assumed that if they were on speaking terms with the writer, that you were in their pocket. Writers were sh-t. When Island Records set up business in the U.S., I was introduced to Jim Capaldi of Traffic and the first thing he said was, 'Oh, you're a writer, get me a cup of tea.'"

By the early '70s, Meltzer had branched out. Scribner, house of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, commissioned him to write The Outside Dope, about the year 1974 in sports. Caned-Out, his autobiography, was canned in the galley stage for fear his parents might sue. Straight Arrow, the book wing of Rolling Stone, was impressed enough by his "rep" to believe he might give it lustre, and asked him for a book. "What on?" asked Meltzer. "Culture," they said. "Oh, yeah, that stuff," he said.

> **Meltzer describes himself as the "giddiest smartass to hold the banner high."**

The result was 1972's Gulcher: Post-Rock Pluralism in America 1648-1984, a kind of Whole Perverse Catalogue, short takes on pop detritus that amounted to rare roundhouse humour in the counterculture: bottle-cap collecting (he once accumulated 4,000); condoms; The Wonderful World of Booze; Rocky Graziano's struggle to become a TV star, complete with Meltzer's list of pilot ideas ("13. A hypochondriac who gets a different fake disease every week"); the influence of Ogden Nash on Allen Ginsberg; Neil Sedaka: Horseman of the Apocalypse; snuff ... stuff.

As his subject matter grew wider and wilder, so did Meltzer's public persona; in Whore he describes himself as the "giddiest smartass to hold the banner high." An "incredible" indoor fountain at a fancy eatery where the Stones held court begged the question: Who's gonna jump in? "I look around, I don't see no candidates, Mick's asleep face-down on a table. So it's gotta be me – got to, right? 'Cause if not, if the option's so clear and nobody does it, rock-roll as we um uh know it will um uh perish, y'know?" (Tut-tut.)

An invite to an Alice Cooper party came with an eye patch; a visit to the butcher netted a lamb's eye, so when someone "jokingly" asked him what happened to his eye he produced it from his pocket. (Gross!) Another function at a museum prompted him to urinate on a tapestry. (Uh-oh.)

Burned out, Meltzer moved to Los Angeles in 1975: "Biggest mistake in my life."

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Meltzer has never hidden his disdain for the rock-crit establishment, hell-bent on glory and profit. Whore spills the beans with bile.

He was kicked out of Rolling Stone by critic and music editor Jon Landau (who eventually became Bruce Springsteen's producer, and hit the mother lode as co-producer of Titanic). Landau cowered after getting an earful from Atlantic Records over Meltzer's negative review of a band called Cactus: "It got to the point where Landau would say, 'If you like it, you can review it.' Finally, he discovered that (his closest writer friend) Nick Tosches and I both reviewed the first Commander Cody album using the other's name, and he threw us both out."

Robert Christgau, majordomo of the Village Voice, had a T-shirt made up reading, The Dean of American Rock Critics. What, asks Meltzer in Whore, "could possess someone to adopt a handle so sordidly pretentious, so dauntingly ... insipid? Part was just ill-conceived hoax, as obtuse a sham as Springsteen's in bearing a nickname with zero proletarian reverb – the Boss! – but in larger part, it did accurately convey the man's aura of swaggerless dogmatism."

Greil Marcus is another head case. Rolling Stone's first review editor now fancies himself as custodian of the rock-write legacy (he compiled Lester Bangs's Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung and wrote the intro to the re-issue of Meltzer's Aesthetics). He left Meltzer out of Stranded, an anthology on desert-island discs, because of his "rude behaviour" at the final Sex Pistols show in San Francisco in 1978. The Pistols had asked Meltzer to insult the audience, because the punkers considered the atmosphere too pat, like a Grateful Dead show.

"All the invective in my arsenal I dispensed – in spades – I was one uncouth lout – until Bill Graham physically picked me up and threw me out of the building – 'You can't insult my city!' Although what, precisely, was/is rocka rocka roll – or punk – or any kind of youth-twitch – supposed to entail 'if not that?'"

Marcus was offended. Meltzer was politically incorrect. The juxtaposition of Marcus's name with anything, Meltzer writes, "has come to feel as WRONG (i.e., as corrupt) as the mating of basketball footage to The Revolution Will Not Be Televised on a Nike commercial."

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By 1977, having been kicked off mailing lists, Meltzer became drawn to punk. "It caught me by total surprise. The craziest thing of all was that suddenly there was a punk scene in L.A., which is the most loathsome cesspool in the known universe. So, of course, that's where you'd have a totally viable punk scene. It was played in clubs that smelled like puke, and that appealed to me. In all the time I lived there, it was the only thing that really happened. There was a very nice little sense of community amongst these bands," he says.

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Eventually, Meltzer fronted a band called Vom (short for vomit). The band did eight gigs, including the fabled Whisky A Go Go (where the Doors once established residence). "We were like dirty wrestlers. I was Mr. Vom. I couldn't make musical recommendations to the band because I didn't play anything. The more I'd practice a song, the quicker I'd get sick of it. By the time I'd conquered it, why should I go any further? The number of gigs we did was enough. I was already 33 and too tired to do a half-hour set jumping around. On the last gig we played, in San Francisco, I did the entire second set lying on my back."

In 1979, he bluffed his way into hosting Hepcats From Hell, a Saturday night-Sunday morning punk-rock show on KPFK. "It was a pretty good time in my life, to have access to the most interesting people I met in L.A." He sometimes invited them to perform, even with "strangers at home over the phone. 'Put the phone near your drum kit.'"

COURTESY OF JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Richard Meltzer last year:

Soon, money reared its ugly head. "Record companies threw money around at bands that were – pure is a bad word – somewhat incorruptible because they weren't getting a chance to corrupt themselves." The Go-Go's were once "a hard-core gutter band (who) would sing songs about getting raped. If anything, they were a parody of the girl-group. Then the record company said, 'Would you like to become just another girl-group? Well, sign on the dotted line.' They did. It was instantaneous, and it ended the scene."

Since 1981, he's been inside a rock club 15, 20 times, "only because people want to drag me out."

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"In New York I was branded an anti-intellectual, an uncouth lout, by people I worked with who were sticklers for a certain kind of behaviour. When I moved to L.A., I was branded an intellectual for exactly the same reason, and that made me a total leper. I was always yelling 'Fire!' in a burning room. They didn't even notice the heat. Something about living in L.A. made me get serious about trying to articulate it. I didn't feel like doing the scattergun thing any more. I had to be very specific in execution. ... If a syllable wasn't right, I couldn't move to the next one. In a sense, I guess it became musical. I went from doing one draft to infinite drafts. If I didn't have a deadline, I would never stop."

He tried out his new chops in a bi-weekly television column for the LA Reader. Not that he actually watched TV a lot – "a maximum of 15 to 20 seconds of a show, then switch the dial. Twenty paragraphs, reviewing bursts of 20 different shows. After a while, I'd make up shows or an episode of Columbo. ... I got the sense that it was dangerous to watch the stuff, it was cancer. So the writing became sorta political, like 'Don't watch this.' For years, people had been saying 'What's his writing gonna be like when he takes himself seriously?' Suddenly I found that's indeed what I was doing."

Los Angeles was a kind of purgatory for Meltzer. "It makes Vegas look like San Francisco. It's not just the shiny cars: 'Dent it and I'll kill you.' It's the protocol of maintenance of possessions. Every place in the world has people who are status-seekers, social-climbers and snobs. But in L.A. there's no mammal substance to it. Greed doesn't even have a human face in L.A. The end product of cheating somebody isn't even pleasure. It's just a symbol of having won."

In the early '80s, he received death threats over his reply to a California magazine piece by a Warner Brothers publicist who had once written Sex Pistols press releases and become a "devout Christian overnight." Meltzer was outraged that because the magazine "sniffed a trend, they had to print some putz who said, 'Outta my way, here comes God.' He said things like a woman's place is in the kitchen and nursery, because God said so."

A selection of the Reader pieces were "re-worked" in L.A. Is the Capital of Kansas: Painful Lessons in Post-New York Living. They range from absurdist takes on food, local landmarks and show biz (a handful reprinted in Whore) to intense examinations of a chillingly blithe totalitarianism (How I Survived the F--ing Olympics).

Meltzer wasn't finished with the City of Angels. The Rodney King riots of 1992 spurred him to write the blistering One White Man's Opinion, reflecting his feelings on "the ongoing inhumanity of white people to black people."

"In all my years in L.A., I never had a minute of civic pride for that dumb place, until the first two days of the riots where these guys were trying to burn the place down. Finally, somebody was trying to do something right. I quickly realized that it would be one more excuse to slaughter these people. I ended the piece by saying that as a white person I felt incredible shame." He refers to the trial of Socrates, who's asked what he thinks his punishment should be for thought-crimes against the state. "My feeling was the punishment for the rioters was they should be given control of Beverly Hills, and 50 per cent of stock TV networks. Even people who agreed with the piece thought that was just too severe."

In 1995, after he finished writing his first non-linear "novel," The Night (Alone), he moved to Portland, Ore.

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As colleague and confidant, Meltzer drifts throughout another superb recent anthology, The Nick Tosches Reader. Tosches writes that Meltzer is "the only true philosopher with rock-'n'roll sensibilities ... who wrote rock-'n'roll as purely and wildly as Jerry Lee and Sam the Sham made it."

A Whore Just Like the Rest – which was graded "A" by Entertainment Weekly, whatever that's worth – is inevitably being linked to Let It Blurt, the recent biography by Jim DeRogatis of rock critic Lester Bangs, who died in 1982 of an overdose of cold medication and, Meltzer says, "being Lester." The comparison is a sore point with Meltzer, whose career has been overshadowed by his acolyte's.

"It's like anything else, people accept the hype as if it's the reality. Lester was my friend and all that, but he's dead. I've done my tribute to Lester. I don't care to get on his and DeRogatis's bandwagon any more than when Danny Sugarman wrote his Jim Morrison bio, Nobody Here Gets Out Alive, and called me up to say, 'Let's celebrate Jim.'"

He likens Bangs to "the sidekick of Gene Autry, Smiley Burnett, tripping over his boots. I mean, Lester was a lovable oaf, but he was a bozo!" One problem, he writes, was that Bangs had no outside interests other than rock'n'roll.

A Whore Just Like the Rest "became a guided tour through my own mess, a documentation of my 30-something years writing about this sh-t. It's also a fairly accurate take on the whole genre itself – whatever it is, the music, the writing, the corporate side. It's something like history and art criticism, any genre."

> **A Whore Just Like the Rest "became a guided tour through my own mess."**

Especially ending with Vinyl Reckoning. "I'm trying to get at issues like, What does it mean to get sick of specific musical pieces that you love? I put on Where Have All the Good Times Gone by the Kinks and decided, 'Well, that's probably the last time I will ever play it.' You know, I love that song, but I used it up. I memorized the sound, every nuance of it. What does it mean to use up the meat and potatoes of your artistic aesthetic life? Nothing is etched in stone: that's what rock'n'roll was always good for, that it was a house of cards. As the house of cards falls down, what does it mean? Is it good or bad? I think it's just as good as it is bad," he says.

These days, he doesn't follow rock-'n'roll or sports (except for checking the occasional sumo-wrestling event), rarely watches TV and loathes the Internet. The future? He speaks, tentatively, of another novel. "I would just as soon just call it a 'book.' Publishers don't want books – they want rock books, coffee-table books, whatever. I have lots of pieces lying around that don't fit into any of these categories. One of the reasons I did The Night (Alone), re-working those general pieces about my life as fiction, was simply because I did not want them to die.

"I've just turned 55. Why shouldn't I pretend I'll live another 15 years and maybe have time for three, four more books? If I don't get started soon, I'll just lose track of it."

✦ ***A Whore Just Like the Rest***, *by Richard Meltzer (Da Capo Press, $25.95).*

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